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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #8658/01 360213Z
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 262132Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0637
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 7958
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 9705
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 5741
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 1011
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 6445

UNCLAS BOGOTA 008658

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OES/PCI FOR LSPERLING; WHA/EPCS FOR FCORNEILLE; EPA FOR
HILL-MACON

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [ELTN](#) [EPET](#) [SENV](#) [SOCI](#) [ENRG](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: BOGOTA AIR QUALITY AMONG WORST IN LATIN AMERICA

REF: BOGOTA 8092

11. SUMMARY: Bogota's seven million plus inhabitants breathe some of the worst air in the region. Air quality falls below safe levels over 95 percent of the time. Low-quality fuel, poor driving practices, and urban deforestation are largely to blame. GOC officials expect an agreement to improve diesel fuel, new emissions standards and a forthcoming air quality plan to improve life for Bogota's citizens. END SUMMARY.

More Bad Air Days

12. A study released in November found that Bogota's air quality ranks third worst of all Latin American capitals, ahead of only Mexico City and Santiago. The author of the study, Professor Javier Burgos of Bogota's National University, has studied Bogota's air for over seven years and said it is steadily worsening. He told us only Bogota's frequent strong winds prevent it from having the worst air quality of all Latin American capitals.

13. Burgos identified Bogota's 20,000 diesel buses as the main culprit. He noted that during a recent bus strike air quality improved by over 50 percent within days. Burgos said poor fuel contributed to the problem: buses use low quality diesel which generates clouds of particulate laden exhaust. In addition, when diesel buses drive erratically, with sudden stops and starts, they produce far more exhaust. Bad roads (over half of Bogota's roads are significantly damaged) and policies which encourage drivers to stop for every potential passenger (drivers' salaries depend on the number of passengers) greatly increase bus exhaust.

Safe to Breathe Only 16 Days a Year

14. Burgos said anything above 150 micrograms of particulates per cubic meter (PM10) per day is considered unsafe for human health under international standards. In 2006 Bogota's air quality averaged 154 PM10 per day and met acceptable levels for human health only 16 days during the entire year. In some parts of the city particulate levels often went as high as 230 PM10. Burgos estimates that every 10 microgram rise in the PM10 level leads to a four percent rise in the number of respiratory problems. Respiratory ailments are currently the number one health problem in Bogota, with about 15 percent of the children in Bogota's hospitals there due to respiratory problems caused by poor air quality. Burgos is currently working on a study that on the relationship between Bogota's

air pollution worker absenteeism.

¶15. In 1998 Bogota instituted the "Pico y Placa" program to restrict the number of cars driving within city limits during peak commute hours. The system operates on a rotating daily cycle based on the last digit of license plates. The city's Transit Office credits Pico y Placa with removing 200,000 cars per day (out of 1 million total) from Bogota's streets. In September of 2006 the city expanded the program to cover public buses. Still, Burgos said the program has not significantly improved air quality because bus companies either ignore the law or circumvent it by switching plates.

Urban Deforestation Exacerbates Problem

¶16. Studies have shown that trees help keep air clean by absorbing carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. The World Health Organization recommends cities maintain at least one tree per every three urban residents. Bogota Botanical Gardens official Manuel Jose Amaya told us that a recent tree survey showed that Bogota has only one tree for every seven residents and almost one third may need to be cut down because of old age or disease.

A Breath of Fresh Air on the Way

¶17. In 2006 the Ministry of the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development (MinEnv) produced a resolution with Colombia's first particulate emissions standards. The resolution limits particulates to a maximum of 150 PM10 per day throughout the country. Helver Reyes Lozano, an advisor to the MinEnv who worked on the resolution, admitted that publishing a resolution does not mean immediate enforcement, especially in large cities like Bogota. Reyes described the GOC as just beginning to grapple with the issue of air pollution. Still, Reyes called the new standards a "critical first step" in reducing air pollution.

¶18. In November 2007, MinEnv and the Ministry of Mines and Energy reached an agreement to improve the quality of diesel used in Bogota. Beginning in January 2008, Colombia will implement a mandate to blend five percent biodiesel into the diesel transportation fuel mix (reftel). GOC officials expect emission-reducing biodiesel combined with higher quality traditional diesel to emit 30 percent less particulates by 2010. Efforts to reduce diesel emissions follows similar steps to introduce a 10 percent ethanol blend to the gasoline fuel mix in major Colombian cities in 2005 to cut air pollution. As analysts expect diesel consumption to significantly outpace gasoline in Colombia over the next decade, improvements to the diesel fuel mix are critical to long-term emissions reduction.

¶19. Reyes said the MinEnv is developing an air quality plan for Bogota. The MinEnv will present the plan to Bogota's new mayor in early 2008. The plan will include specific recommendations for the new administration on a wide range of areas including repairing roads, improving traffic flows, and reforesting urban areas. In addition, the MinEnv and industry are working together on a plan to reduce Bogota's industrial air pollution. A pilot program in Medellin to reduce industrial particulates through emissions credit exchanges may serve as a model for Bogota.

Nichols